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Please pass the SALT

Washington

If you tend to favor the new SALT treaty or if you lean toward opposing it, there is no reason to be dismayed. One thing seems sure: it is going to be thoroughly debated.

The advocates and the opponents will be appealing to two juries — the jury of the Senate and the jury of public opinion.

The decision, either way, is being approached with a reasonably open mind. This is evident in the fact that most senators have not yet decided how they will vote. It is also evident in the fact that while most Americans favor SALT II in principle, they want and need to know a lot more about its provisions before approving it.

This seems to me to be a healthy state of mind with which to begin to measure the upcoming debate since it is compounded of earnest hope and honest skepticism. In effect most Americans are saying to the advocates and to the critics of the treaty: "We're willing to be shown but we will have to be solidly persuaded." Undoubtedly each jury — the Senate and the public — will interact upon the other. That's the way it should be.

The debate will focus on at least three central concerns, though others may emerge.

- Do the terms of the treaty, the full text of which is not yet public, permit the Soviets to achieve a strategic-arms superiority over the United States? Here's an example: SALT II gives the Soviet Union the right to modernize 308 heavy ballistic missile launchers, but the US is not permitted to do so. The administration answers that the US has never intended nor felt the need to build large missile launchers. But it remains that under SALT II we have given up the right to do so, if the need should arise or our intention should change.

- In recent years we have not been building our military strength within the permissible limits of SALT I while the Soviet Union has been steadily expanding its military in nearly every category within the permissible limits of SALT I. The result has been that Soviet military strength has been growing to the perceived disadvantage of the US.

It has now reached a point where the administration is now talking about beginning to do something about the problem.

The stated goal of the SALT negotiations has been to bring about a "rough equivalence" between the two superpowers. It seems to me that President Carter would enhance the prospect of Senate approval of SALT II if he showed to the country and to Congress that he is unreservedly committed to do all that is open to him to maintain such equivalence.

How important is such equality? One answer comes from the Congressional Office of Technology assessment. It concludes that if the US does not have sufficient retaliatory power to deter a Soviet first-strike, some 165 million Americans could die and American living conditions would become the "economic equivalent of the Middle Ages."

Another answer comes from Secretary of Defense Harold Brown who has said that "if the Soviet Union achieves superiority, it will make every effort to exploit it."

- A third critical issue in the SALT debate will be whether the US has adequate means to verify possible violations. The administration has testified that it needs air bases in Turkey from which to launch U-2 reconnaissance planes to fly over Soviet territory to check on compliance. Turkey has said it would be willing to grant such facilities if the Soviet Union approves. Soviet approval would be welcome but, if Moscow refuses, this would persuade many senators that the Soviet Union wanted to make it difficult or impossible for the US to monitor the treaty effectively.

It will be well to wait for more facts before making up our minds.